



Duxbury Free Library

Contemporary Authors

Beatrice Gormley

1942-

Nationality: American**Year of Birth:** 1942**Place of Birth:** Glendale, CA**Table of Contents:**

- [Personal Information](#)
- [Career](#)
- [Writings](#)
- [Sidelights](#)
- [Further Readings About the Author](#)

Personal Information: Family: Born October 15, 1942, in Glendale, CA; daughter of Louis Kirk and Elizabeth (Fisher) LeCount; married Robert J. Gormley (a college textbook publisher), September 4, 1966; children: Catherine, Jennifer. Education: Pomona College, B.A. (magna cum laude), 1964. Memberships: Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Addresses: Home: Ossining, NY. Agent: Aladdin Books, 1230 Avenue Of The Americas, New York, NY 10020.

Education: Entry Updated : 04/19/2002

Career: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Menlo Park, CA, assistant English editor, 1966-67; freelance editor, 1968-77; full-time writer.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

FOR CHILDREN

- *Mail-Order Wings*, illustrations by Emily Arnold McCully, Dutton (New York, NY), 1981.
- *Fifth Grade Magic*, illustrations by Emily Arnold McCully, Dutton (New York, NY), 1982.
- *Best Friend Insurance*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1983.
- *The Ghastly Glasses*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1985.

- *Paul's Volcano*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1987.
- *Richard and the Vratck*, Avon (New York, NY), 1987.
- *More Fifth Grade Magic*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1989.
- *Wanted, UFO*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Sky Guys to White Cat*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Ellie's Birthstone Ring*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Maria Mitchell: The Soul of an Astronomer*, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 1995.
- *First Ladies: Women Who Called the White House Home*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 1997.
- *C. S. Lewis: Christian and Storyteller*, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 1998.
- *Miriam*, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 1999.
- *Louisa May Alcott: Young Novelist*, Aladdin (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Amelia Earhart: Young Aviator*, Aladdin (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Adara*, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 2001.
- *President George W. Bush: Our Forty-third President*, Aladdin (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Laura Ingalls Wilder: Young Pioneer*, Aladdin (New York, NY), 2001.

Also a contributor to magazines and newspapers.

"Sidelights"

Beatrice Gormley is the author of books for young readers, including novels that blend fantasy and reality, as well as biographies of famous writers, scientists, and politicians. With novels such as *Mail-Order Wings*, *Fifth Grade Magic* and its sequel, *More Fifth Grade Magic*, *Paul's Volcano*, *Wanted, UFO*, and *Richard and the Vratck*, Gormley serves up entertaining mixtures of magic and humor for middle-grade readers. Working in nonfiction, Gormley has written inspiring biographies of pioneering women, such as in her *Maria Mitchell: The Soul of an Astronomer*, *Louisa May Alcott: Young Novelist*, and *Amelia Earhart: Young Aviator*, as well as a biography of the author of the "Narnia" books, C. S. Lewis, and of the forty-third president of the United States, George W. Bush. And with her *Miriam* she moved into new writing territory with the fictionalized biography of the biblical Miriam, sister of Moses.

Born in Glendale, California, in 1942, Gormley decided at an early age what she wanted to do when she grew up. "When I was eight," the author once commented, "I wanted to become a cowgirl when I grew up. By the time I was ten I had changed my mind, deciding to become a writer instead. That has been my heart's desire ever since." Gormley passed a happy childhood in California, as she once

described: "In my spare time, when I wasn't reading, I was playing in the sagebrush-covered hills behind my family's house in Burbank, California. Sometimes I explored the canyons and ridges and their absorbing variety of wildflowers and shrubs and trees. Sometimes I played fantasy games in which I was shipwrecked or captured by Indians. Sometimes I just sat under a bush and smelled the pungent sage and felt peaceful and happy."

Despite her evident love of nature, her first love remained writing. "All through school I was encouraged in my ambition," Gormley once noted. "My teachers were enthusiastic about my writing; I even won awards for writing. So, I was confident that I would know, when the time came, *how* to become a writer. But I graduated from college with my final prize for student fiction and still no idea of how to go about earning my living as a professional writer. Instead I went into textbook publishing, and edited and rewrote other people's prose. This was interesting work, but not exactly what I had in mind when I was ten. I wrote short stories now and then, dreary, aimless stories that I would never want to read myself, and sent them to the *New Yorker*. They were always sent back with printed rejection slips."

Finally, however, Gormley decided that if she really wanted to become a writer, she had to get radical about it. "It began to dawn on me that perhaps I hadn't worked hard enough at becoming a writer," Gormley remarked. "Maybe I had to give it more time and effort--maybe I had to risk failing. So I worked up my courage, stopped accepting freelance editing jobs (I was lucky to have this option, because my husband could support us on his salary) and spent that time on my own writing. At first I concentrated on articles and essays, and I was delighted to see my work in print in newspapers and magazines. But I couldn't stop trying to write fiction, even though I was still totally unsuccessful in getting it published. Then, in the year that my two daughters were eight and ten, I began to write stories for children. They were the kind of stories I liked to read at that age--adventure stories, especially with some magic or science fiction.

"I enjoyed writing these stories so much I couldn't understand why I'd never tried them before. In June of 1979 I took my latest attempt, *Mail-Order Wings*, to a writer's conference. To my great good fortune, Jane Langton was teaching the 'Writing for Children' section. She encouraged me, helped me revise *Mail-Order Wings*, and advised me to send it to Ann Durell at Dutton. I felt that my fairy godmother had appeared! Ann Durell thought my manuscript was promising, but outlined major revisions, and I saw right away that the story could be ten times better if I did what she said. Sweating to make these revisions, I had my first revelation about how hard one has to work to write a good story."

Published in 1981, *Mail-Order Wings* tells the magical story of young Andrea who has a great desire to fly. Purchasing a pair of WondaWings through the post, she is surprised that, when donning them, she actually can fly. Even greater is her surprise, however, when she discovers her wings are impossible to remove and that in fact feathers are beginning to sprout on her back. "This book is exciting, believable, sometimes comic, and it shows real feeling for the lives of birds, and what it might be like to be one," wrote Rodie Sudbery in a *School Librarian* review of this debut novel. A contributor for *Publishers Weekly* called Gormley's first effort a "neat mixture of reality and fantasy."

"After writing *Mail-Order Wings* in a haphazard way, and with a great deal of advice," Gormley once commented, "I knew that I would have to find a more organized method of working if I was going to make a career out of this. I did some painful and unsuccessful trial-and-error work, and then a friend told me about Phyllis Whitney's *Writing Juvenile Stories and Novels*. I began to keep a notebook, as Whitney advises, with sections for outline, theme, characters, and so on. Her method has been invaluable to me."

Reprising the characters from her first book, Gormley has Andrea fitted for glasses in *The Ghastly Glasses*. But instead of the eye doctor's office, Andrea and her Aunt Bets wind up in a psychic research laboratory, where Andrea receives some very peculiar glasses--ones that allow her to focus inside an individual's personality and change it. Initially, she enjoys "improving" the people around her, but soon she tires of such powers and destroys the glasses, returning everyone to their former selves. Reviewing the title in *School Library Journal*, Lisa Smith noted that the "ethical conflict in meddling with other's personalities is keenly felt." *Horn Book* reviewer Anita Silvey thought that the "humor, drama, and suspense of the story make it a delightful page-turner," adding that the "characters are as eccentric and engaging as the plot."

Another pair of companion books also fit into the fantasy genre: *Fifth Grade Magic* and *More Fifth Grade Magic*. In the former title, Gretchen Nichols gets help from her fairy godmother, Errora, when she is passed over as the lead in her school play, a part given to her rival, Amy, instead. But then Errora solves the problem: she casts a spell to put Gretchen inside Amy's skin. Mistakes and miscalculations abound before the eventual happy ending. In the sequel title, Amy and Gretchen are now friends, but Amy is forced to use the magic powers she discovers in a calendar to cope with her new career as a child model, despite Gretchen's warnings. Reviewing *More Fifth Grade Magic* in *Booklist*, Carolyn Phelan concluded that "fast-paced action," as well as "believable magic" and "touches of humor," combine to make this an "appealing book for young readers."

More friends are featured in *Best Friend Insurance*, in which Maureen, made unhappy by the defection of her best buddy, follows the advice of an odd insurance salesman and takes out a policy for friend insurance. Maureen, however, is less than pleased when she finds that this replacement friend is in fact her own mother, transformed into a fifth-grader named Kitty. *Booklist* reviewer Barbara Elleman remarked that Gormley's "understanding of fifth-graders' woes and excitements is evident," while George Gleason, writing in *School Library Journal*, lauded the "wacky, occasionally humorous situations."

Gormley once commented on her use of fantasy in her novels for young readers: "I have always enjoyed reading fantasy (C. S. Lewis's "Narnia" books, the Tolkien trilogy, Ursula LeGuin's "Earthsea" trilogy), but it wasn't until I started to write it myself that I learned, from the inside out, that this most fanciful fiction must be based on the most solid psychological truth. I was amazed that I had to be so honest with myself in order to write a good story."

Further adventures in fantasy are delivered up in *Richard and the Vrch*, *Paul's Volcano*, *Wanted, UFO*, and *Sky Guys to White Cat*. Animals figure in many of Gormley's plot. In *Richard and the Vrch*, an adopted dog turns out to be a supposedly extinct critter, while *Sky Guys to White Cat* features an extraterrestrial feline, which is exploring the earth for the out-of-this-world Aldebarans. "Readers will laugh out loud at this outrageous adventure," wrote *Booklist* critic Chris Sherman in a review of *Sky Guys to White Cat*. More aliens appear in *Wanted, UFO*, in which an eager science student gets more than she bargained for in her quest to spot a UFO--namely, aliens in the backyard. Ruth Smith, reviewing this novel in *School Library Journal*, pointed to Gormley's "knack for short dramatic sentences" that "makes this a real page-turner." *Booklist* contributor Kay Weisman noted of the same book that "young sf fans will be caught up in the mystery." In *Paul's Volcano*, the young members of a club worship their model volcano, calling up an evil spirit. "As is her habit, Gormley adds a dash of the supernatural to this expertly concocted farce," noted John Peters in *School Library Journal*.

Gormley turned her hand to fiction of a different order in *Ellie's Birthstone Ring* and *Miriam*. The former, a realistic tale, deals with questions of friendship when Ellie, who is about to turn seven, must

decide whom to invite to her party. A ring she sees in a store downtown compounds the decision in this book that is, according to a contributor for *Kirkus Reviews*, "likable, perceptive, [and] easily read." *Miriam*, on the other hand, is an experiment in historical fiction, telling the story of Moses's sister, Miriam, who struggles to remain loyal to both her people and religion while living in the Pharaoh's palace. "*Miriam* is far more than a biblical retelling," wrote Barbara Auerbach in *School Library Journal*. "Gormley gives readers the universal struggle between mother and daughter." "Gormley's novel not only imparts many interesting details but may well send children back to the original Bible passages that were its inspiration," predicted a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*. And writing in *Kliatt*, Claire M. Dignan found *Miriam* to be "an engaging historical fiction about one girl's coming of age during the time of the pharaohs."

Actual rather than fictional history is provided in other works from Gormley. Her biography *Maria Mitchell: The Soul of an Astronomer* introduces this first female science professor at Vassar and the first to become an astronomer in America. Phyllis Graves, reviewing the book in *School Library Journal*, noted Gormley's "smoothly flowing and lively style" in this study of the discoverer of Comet Mitchell and the first woman inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. A contributor for *Kirkus Reviews* found this same biography "Inspiring and incisive." Other biographies from Gormley include studies of the writers C. S. Lewis and Louisa May Alcott, as well as the aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart. With *President George W. Bush*, Gormley relates the life story of the forty-third president in a "brisk and informative biography," according to William McLoughlin in *School Library Journal*.

"The writing of each [book] has evoked surprisingly strong feelings," Gormley once noted, "strong enough to distort the story if I don't face up to them. The core of each book is something important to me. Of course it is equally important to entertain my readers; I think a dull or dreary novel is worthless."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- *Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1992.

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, February 1, 1984, Barbara Elleman, review of *Best Friend Insurance*, p. 813; May 15, 1987, p. 1445; December 15, 1987, p. 714; August, 1989, Carolyn Phelan, review of *More Fifth Grade Magic*, p. 1976; July, 1990, Kay Weisman, review of *Wanted, UFO*, p. 2089; December 1, 1991, Chris Sherman, review of *Sky Guys to White Cat*, p. 697; December 15, 1992, p. 736; September 1, 1995, p. 53; March 15, 1997, p. 1236; March 15, 1998, p. 1231; April 1, 1999, p. 1424; May 15, 2001, p. 1747.
- *Book Report*, September-October, 1996, p. 50.
- *Books for Keeps*, September, 1987, review of *Mail-Order Wings*, p. 25.
- *Horn Book*, October, 1982, p. 516; March-April, 1986, Anita Silvey, review of *Ghastly Glasses*, pp. 200-201.

- *Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 1987, p. 552; November 15, 1992, review of *Ellie's Birthstone Ring*, pp. 1442-1443; June 15, 1995, review of *Maria Mitchell*, p. 857.
- *Kliatt*, July 1999, Claire M. Dignan, review of *Miriam*, p. 16.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 17, 1981, p. 94; April 13, 1984, review of *Mail-Order Wings*, p. 72; November 1, 1985, p. 65; November 16, 1992, p. 64; January 25, 1999, review of *Miriam*, p. 89.
- *School Librarian*, November, 1987, Rodie Sudbery, review of *Mail- Order Wings*, p. 330.
- *School Library Journal*, February, 1984, George Gleason, review of *Best Friend Insurance*, p. 70; January, 1986, Lisa Smith, review of *The Ghastly Glasses*, pp. 66-67; March, 1987, John Peters, review of *Paul's Volcano*, p. 158; July, 1990, Ruth Smith, review of *Wanted, UFO*, p.76; December, 1991, p. 114; January, 1993, p. 76; January, 1995, Phyllis Graves, review of *Maria Mitchell*, pp. 132, 134; June, 1998, pp. 158, 160; May, 1999, Barbara Auerbach, review of *Miriam*, p. 125; June, 2001, William McLoughlin, review of *President George W. Bush*, p. 172.

OTHER

- *Beatrice Gormley Web site*, <http://www.webcom.com/bgormley> (December 8, 2001).*

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2002.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors

PEN (Permanent Entry Number): 0000038291

THOMSON
*
GALE

Copyright and Terms of Use